

When Stars Shine

When the land strips the color away from summer's light, all falls dark. Clouds roll in and translucence gives way to stellar dendrites falling from the sky leaving traces of snow on every surface.

The mountain opened reluctantly with barren soils peeking through man-made snow, although this was a sign for another epic year. Late snows usually mean when it comes, it comes hard and heavy. Audrey Rose had already warned the wildlife the tourists were coming, giving them a chance to find a new home or put on their best smiles for photo ops. She said good-bye to the peacefulness of mud season and prepared herself to make new friends.

Thanksgiving saw plenty of empty homes and job losses across the country. Giving thanks brought new awareness of the important things in life – family, a place to sleep, food to put on the table. Audrey Rose spent the day alone, in the branch of a pine, killed by the beetle. Without the needles she could see much further.

Looking out over the landscape, a magpie's scavenging, elk bugling and the mountain lions chasing trains, Audrey Rose gave thanks for her life and the lives of every person and creature she had come into contact with. She used Thanksgiving as a day of silence, a day of peace.

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“When it is darkest, men see the stars,” said Ralph Waldo Emerson and the drunk guy at Tugboat.

“For my part I know nothing with any certainty but the sight of the stars makes me dream,” said Vincent Van Gough and Audrey Rose.

The man was dark and hairy. Full wiry beard, eyebrows that reached out close to an inch from his face.

“Is life really so bad?” asked Audrey Rose who was working on her fifth Baileys shot to help her feel more in the holiday spirit.

“Let's see. Lost my job. My wife cheated on me because I spend too much time at the bar and I'll probably lose my house before the end of the year.”

“Then this is the perfect time for the barter system.”

“If I have nothing, then what the hell am I supposed to barter?”

“Everyone has something to give,” said Audrey Rose “just watch.”

Audrey Rose went behind the bar and hugged the bartender who poured her a free drink.

“As easy as that,” said Audrey Rose.

“Sure. You're a chick with no top on. Of course you get things for free.”

“Oh, sunshine. That wasn't free. He got human touch, sharing warmth with another person. Now you try.”

“Hell no.”

“Not the bartender.”

The man got up, picked up Audrey Rose and hugged her as tight as he could.

“Giddy-up,” squealed Audrey Rose as the man put her down. “That’s the best bear hug I’ve had in a long time.”

Audrey Rose went behind the bar, hugged the bartender and the bartender poured the hairy man a drink.

“How cloudy is your sky now?”

“I think I see a star.”

“Just one? Because you lit up my Milky Way.”

The man had not just given Audrey Rose a hug, but he had reminded her how much she liked hugs.

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On the way out of the bar, Audrey Rose hugged every patron. Some hugged back, some backed away. The free bus took her down to city market where she convinced the supermarket to give her free paper, glitter and glue so she could make a sign. For the rest of the day she stood outside with her sign that offered free hugs. She sign sparkled and so did Audrey Rose with each hug she received. Small kids, mothers, friends, boyfriends, so many people gave hugs and received smiles and passed smile to smile to smile.

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The day faded. Fireplaces were lit, lights turned on. Clouds moved on to other towns. For those few people that were walking outside, the stars shone brighter than they had in years. Meteors lit up the sky, a flash of hope, something to dream on.